

Questions Await School Debate at Town Meeting

By JANE LANE

There are five articles on the June 12 special town meeting warrant, but it would be hard to tell. Most of Monday night's attention and debate will be focused on a \$2 million request to jump-start an ambitious school renovation and construction project.

Discussions about the need to expand school facilities began nearly two years ago as enrollment numbers illustrated a prolonged spike in student population. Last fall the school

committee hired an independent consultant group to undertake an extensive study of the school buildings, the curriculum and population projections as they affect student enrollment.

It was their recommendation last January that the current facilities would not be sufficient to accommodate the projected influx of students into the system. The New England School Development

Council offered four alternatives that would meet enrollment demands, with smaller class sizes and the option of implementing a full-day Kindergarten program.

In February Supt. Eileen Williams recommended a school facilities master plan that encompassed many of the elements of the NESDEC report, including a new early childhood center adjacent to the Chandler School which would accommodate the Magic Dragon program, the extended day program, preschool and Kindergarten within 28 classrooms. The other major construction project would be a 'connecting structure' between Alden and the middle school to accommodate a 1,000-seat community performing arts center. Renovations were also included for the Chandler, Alden and middle schools.

Current estimates for the construction project stand between \$25 to \$28 million, although that figure won't be firmed up until the design plans are drawn and approved. Once the design phase is completed with cost estimates attached, the school committee will come before next year's annual town meeting with a request for construction funds in the form of a debt exclusion override.

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Although there are no guarantees at this point, the town could be in line to receive 67 percent reimbursement of the project from the state school building assistance program. As Williams explained, the application process will begin once money for the design has been approved. If town meeting in 2001 approves construction, the application process is finalized and the reimbursement could be approved by June 30, 2001. Although the reimbursement formula has long been a topic of debate at the state level, with predictions that the bottom could suddenly fall out of the money well, Williams said that the least the town could expect to receive would be 50 to 55 percent of the construction costs. "The indications to us is that if we follow the timeline we established for this project, we stand an excellent chance of receiving the 67 percent reimbursement," she said.

Although the initial hurdle will be to get the \$25-plus million dollar debt exclusion override next year, Williams knows there are questions about what this project will add to future budgets in regard to additional annual operating costs. (See *Selectmen story on page one-Ed*)

Asst. Supt. Mickey

McGonagle and Town Administrator Rocco Longo are crunching those numbers. Answers will be forthcoming at the June 12 meeting, although Williams warned that projecting accurate numbers "three years out" at which time the completed master plan will be operational is not an exact science.

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**Eileen Williams
School Superintendent**

ence. How can you accurately predict the costs of a proposed full-day Kindergarten, she asked, when it has not been decided how and when that program will be implemented? "Will we phase the program in, will we make it mandatory or will parents be allowed the final decision? These are questions that will have a direct impact on the final costs and yet we don't have all the answers yet," Williams added.

"We were asked by the finance committee and the fiscal advisory committee to put together operating costs and that is what we are doing. Those numbers will be ready for those committees to review (this week)," she said. "The school committee began meeting with selectmen and the finance committee almost a year ago and we have been providing them with information as long."

The fiscal advisory committee, according to member Barbara Kiley, will not venture a vote on the school project until the operational cost estimates are presented. This project may result in a significant increase in the annual school budget, she said, adding that it would be difficult to cast an informed vote on the June 12 request without advance knowledge of what the ultimate impact of the project will be on future budgets.

Other questions are being raised as well. In a letter to the editor published this week, Ruth Rowley, a former health board member, asked what impact the increased sewage from the Alden-DMS addition and the performing arts center would have on the existing treatment plant at the high school. "Is this part of the estimated construction costs? What type of replacement facility is being considered?" she wrote.

Williams responded that this has been a topic of discussion between the town and the school department. The town, Williams said, recently hired an engineering firm to work out such issues. At a meeting be-

tween DPW Director Wally Tonaszuck and the school construction building committee, the topic of wastewater treatment at the high school and Chandler campus was reviewed, she said. "It was decided that whatever will be done will be coordinated between the town and the schools. That is what the town's engineering consultants have been hired to study," Williams added.

Williams understands that until they are further along in the process, accurate answers can't be supplied for all the questions. But, she insists, the school committee and administrators have attempted to answer everything as publicly and accurately as possible.

For the past year the school committee has been working to shed light on this project, the superintendent explained. It began as agenda items at public school committee meetings where members discussed the problematic issues of student enrollment and class sizes. In the fall, NESDEC was hired to complete an independent audit of the school facilities, tied to their projections for future enrollment and curriculum needs. At two well-attended public meetings in December and January, NESDEC presented their preliminary and later, final plans, to the public. The following month Williams presented her recommendation to the school committee. Since discussions have begun, parents and community leaders have been mailed notices of all meetings in which the project would be reviewed. Sally Von Benken, a demographic specialist connected with the NESDEC team, made a presentation to the March town meeting on population projections and their impact on the school system.

The school department scheduled three public meetings in which the school facilities master plan was reviewed in depth with time allotted for audience questions. The dates and times of those public meetings were published and were scheduled at varying times—the morning, the evening, and a mid-day presentation before the Council on Aging. In addition, a timetable of the construction project was mailed home to every parent and was published last month in the *Clipper*. The public was encouraged to submit their questions and comments to the superintendent's office.

"I honestly think we have done as much as possible to get the information out and to solicit community response to the project," Williams said.